

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *The Road*

Author: Cormac McCarthy

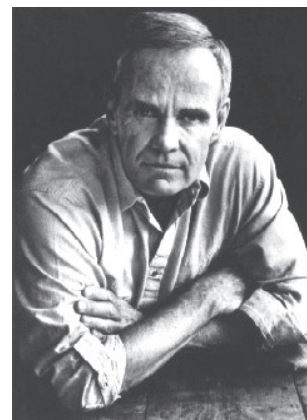
Born July 20, 1933, in Providence, RI; son of Charles Joseph and Gladys McCarthy; married Lee Holleman, 1961 (divorced); married Anne de Lisle, 1967 (divorced); married Jennifer Winkley, 1998; children: (first marriage) Cullen. Education: Attended University of Tennessee, four years. Addresses: Home: El Paso, TX. Office: c/o Alfred A. Knopf, 201 East 50th Street, New York, NY 10022. Agent: Amanda Urban, International Creative Management, 40 West 57th St., New York, NY 10019.

Name: Cormac McCarthy

Born: July 20, 1933

Education: University of Tennessee

Addresses: 201 East 50th Street, New York, NY 10022



Career:

Writer. Military service: U.S. Air Force, 1953-56.

Awards:

Ingram-Merrill Foundation grant for creative writing, 1960; American Academy of Arts and Letters traveling fellowship to Europe, 1965-66; William Faulkner Foundation award, 1965, for *The Orchard Keeper*; Rockefeller Foundation grant, 1966; Guggenheim fellowship, 1976; MacArthur Foundation grant, 1981; Jean Stein Award, American Academy and Institution of Arts and Letters, 1991; National Book Award for fiction, 1992, and National Book Critics Award for fiction, both for *All the Pretty Horses*; Lyndhurst Foundation grant; Institute of Arts and Letters award; Pulitzer Prize for fiction, James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction, Quill Award for general fiction, and Oprah Winfrey Book Club selection, all 2007, all for *The Road*.

Writings:

The Orchard Keeper, Random House (New York, NY), 1965.

Outer Dark, Random House (New York, NY), 1968.

Child of God, Random House (New York, NY), 1974.

The Gardener's Son (teleplay; produced as part of Visions series, Public Broadcasting System, 1977), published as *The Gardener's Son: A Screenplay*, Ecco Press (Hopewell, NJ), 1996.

Suttree, Random House (New York, NY), 1979.

Blood Meridian; or, *The Evening Redness in the West*, Random House (New York, NY), 1985, reprinted with an introduction by Harold Bloom, Modern Library, 2001.

All the Pretty Horses (book one in the *Border Trilogy*), Random House (New York, NY), 1992.

The Crossing (book two in the *Border Trilogy*), Random House (New York, NY), 1994.

Cities of the Plain (book three in the *Border Trilogy*), Random House (New York, NY), 1998.

The Border Trilogy (contains *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain*), Knopf (New York, NY), 1999.

No Country for Old Men, Knopf (New York, NY), 2005.

The Road, Knopf (New York, NY), 2006.

Also author of the play *The Stonemason*. Contributor to *Yale Review* and *Sewanee Review*.



Author: Cormac McCarthy (2)

Sidelights:

Cormac McCarthy is frequently compared with such Southern-based writers as William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor. In a *Dictionary of Literary Biography* essay, Dianne L. Cox stated that McCarthy's work has in common with that of the others "a rustic and sometimes dark humor, intense characters, and violent plots; [he] shares as well their development of universal themes within a highly particularized fictional world, their seriousness of vision, and their vigorous exploration of the English language." "His characters are often outcasts—destitutes or criminals, or both," wrote Richard B. Woodward in the *New York Times*. "Death, which announces itself often, reaches down from the open sky, abruptly, with a slashed throat or a bullet in the face. The abyss opens up at any misstep."

McCarthy's early novels were often set in eastern Tennessee, while his later work focuses on the American Southwest. He has often been singled out for his individual prose style—beautifully lyrical yet spare, eschewing commas and totally stripped of quotation marks. This style has been a source of complaint for some reviewers; in a *New York Times* review of McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*, for example, critic Herbert Mitgang lamented: "This reader was put off at first by the author's all too writerly writing. His joined words, without hyphenation, and his unpunctuated, breathless sentences, call too much attention to themselves." Kurt Tidmore contended in the *Washington Post Book World*, however, that "the reader is never confused. Sentences punctuate themselves by the natural rhythm of their words. Everything is perfectly clear. The poetic never overwhelms the realistic." In addition, wrote Madison Smartt Bell in the *New York Times Book Review*, McCarthy's "elaborate and elevated" prose is "used effectively to frame realistic dialogue, for which his ear is deadly accurate." Bell continued: "Difficult as [McCarthy's writing] may sometimes be, it is also overwhelmingly seductive."

Throughout his career, McCarthy has actively avoided public attention, refusing to participate in lecture tours and seldom granting interviews. "Of all the subjects I'm interested in [talking about]," the author commented in the *New York Times*, "writing is way, way down at the bottom of the list." "Until very recently," observed Bell, "he shunned publicity so effectively that he wasn't even famous for it." Instead, he has concentrated upon crafting his unique and powerful fictions, unaffected by the critical acclaim that is heaped upon him with each new book. McCarthy has been described by Woodward as "a cult figure with a reputation as a writer's writer" who is, perhaps, "the best unknown novelist in America."

In keeping with McCarthy's reclusive nature, little is known about his early life. He was born Charles McCarthy, Jr., in Providence, Rhode Island, on July 20, 1933, the third of six children in an Irish Catholic family. "Sometime later, he or his family—no one seems to know which—changed his name to Cormac after Cormac MacCarthy, the Irish chieftain who built Blarney Castle," explained *Texas Monthly* contributor Michael Hall. When Cormac was four, he and his family moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, where his father got a job as an attorney for the powerful Tennessee Valley Authority." After high school, McCarthy studied engineering at the University of Tennessee, then entered the U.S. Air Force. He served in Alaska for a couple of years before returning to Tennessee and reentering the university. He married twice, having a son, Cullen, with his first wife, and living for a period in a renovated barn on a pig farm with his second wife. In 1976, he moved to Texas, the source of much of his inspiration for his most famous works. "In El Paso McCarthy has become a ghost celebrity, an urban legend," Hall wrote. In 1996, the *Texas Monthly* writer continued, several fans spent some time "going through McCarthy's trash and cataloging it...to prove that he was not some mythic desert hermit but just as urban as everyone else in the city of more than half a million." "Contrary to popular wisdom, McCarthy is not a recluse," Hall stated. "But he is and always has been an intensely private man and a reluctant public one."

McCarthy's first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, deals with three people—a young man who is coming of age in the Tennessee mountains, a bootlegger, and an aged orchard keeper—whose lives are intertwined, even though they don't meet until the end of the story. "Through these characters," wrote Cox, "the novel explores the relationship between individual integrity and independence achievable in the remote natural world of the mountains and the social obligations and strictures imposed by the community of men." J. G. Murray, reviewing *The Orchard Keeper*



Author: Cormac McCarthy (3)

in America, felt that the book is interesting "because it does not seem to be autobiographical and [it] rejects the influence, more bad than good, of the Southern mystique." Murray finds McCarthy's view of adulthood "even more precise and sympathetic than his treatment of youth. And, as everyone knows, it is quite exceptional for young writers to be so objective." Writing in *Harper's*, K. G. Jackson called *The Orchard Keeper* "a complicated and evocative exposition of the transiency of life, well worth the concentration it demands."

Outer Dark, McCarthy's next novel, is "so centered on guilt and retribution that it is largely structured around scenes of judgment," according to Cox. *Outer Dark* tells the story of Culla and Rinthy, a brother and sister who suffer the consequences of their incest in very different ways. Many critics, such as Guy Davenport, compared McCarthy's style in this book to that of William Faulkner. In a *New York Times Book Review* article, Davenport wrote that *Outer Dark* "pays its homage to Faulkner," but went on to note that McCarthy's personal writing style "compels admiration, [being] compounded of Appalachian phrases as plain and as functional as an ax. In elegant counterpoint to this bare-bones English is a second diction taken from that rich store of English which is there in the dictionary to be used by those who can." A *Time* reviewer found that McCarthy's command of local dialect "is surpassed by his poetic descriptions of the land and its people. His is an Irish singing voice imbued with Southern Biblical intonations. The result is an antiphony of speech and verse played against a landscape of penance."

Lester Ballard, the title character of McCarthy's *Child of God*, is a demented backwoodsman, a murderer and necrophiliac. In this 1974 novel the author depicts the spiritual demise of Ballard and at the same time makes him a sympathetic figure. But Richard P. Brickner, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, described *Child of God* as "an essentially sentimental novel that no matter how sternly it strives to be tragic is never more than morose." Similarly, in a review for *Commonweal*, contributor Robert Leiter called the book "thinner [and] less full-bodied than either *The Orchard Keeper* or *Outer Dark*...*Child of God* is a swift exciting read, but we are left with only incisive images strung along a thin plot line, the why and wherefore unexplained." Leiter surmised that the book "will perhaps be looked upon as a bad novel written by a good writer" and concluded that "this would be regrettable, for *Child of God* marks a progression in McCarthy's career. He has learned restraint. The 'old themes' live on in him, but his South is not rendered with the precision of a realist. He has taken realism to the province of folk myth."

Child of God is "a reading experience so impressive, so 'new', so clearly made well that it seems almost to defy the easy esthetic categories and at the same time cause me to thrash about for some help with the necessary description of my enthusiasm," stated Doris Grumbach in *New Republic*, adding, "Cormac McCarthy is a Southerner, a born storyteller,...a writer of natural, impeccable dialogue, a literary child of Faulkner." Grumbach went on to say that in McCarthy's style, "the journey from death-in-life to death-in-death, from the hunted to the discovery of the hunting...is accomplished in rare, spare, precise yet poetic prose." The reviewer felt the author "has allowed us direct communion with his special kind of chaos; every sentence he writes illuminates, if only for a moment, the great dark of madness and violence and inevitable death that surrounds us all."

In a *New Yorker* review of *Child of God*, Robert Coles compared McCarthy to ancient Greek dramatists, saying that he "simply writes novels that tell us we cannot comprehend the riddles of human idiosyncrasy, the influence of the merely contingent or incidental upon our lives. He is a novelist of religious feeling who appears to subscribe to no creed but who cannot stop wondering in the most passionate and honest way what gives life meaning...From the isolated highlands of Tennessee he sends us original stories that show how mysterious or confusing the world is. Moreover, his mordant wit, his stubborn refusal to bend his writing to the literary and intellectual demands of our era, conspire at times to make him seem mysterious and confusing—a writer whose fate is to be relatively unknown and often misinterpreted. But both Greek playwrights and Christian theologians have been aware that such may be the fate of anyone, of even the most talented and sensitive of human beings."



Author: Cormac McCarthy (4)

McCarthy's fourth novel, *Suttree*, again focuses on a misfit character, Cornelius Suttree, and the undesirable society he inhabits. In this book, the author describes Suttree as a man who has spent years in "the company of thieves, derelicts, miscreants, pariahs, poltroons, spalpeens, curmudgeons, clotpolls, murderers, gamblers, bawds, whores, trulls, brigands, toppers, tosspots, sots and archsots, lobcocks, smellsmocks, runagates, rakes, and other assorted and felonious debauchees." Reviewing the book in *Spectator*, Frank Rudman called McCarthy "a magnificent writer with a resonant style that moves easily and naturally into a grand register without losing truthfulness. His ear for dialogue is as funny and authentic as that of Mark Twain." Guy Davenport pointed out possible autobiographical elements in the novel and wondered if McCarthy "had asked what part of himself bears the imprint of the world in which he was raised, and answered himself by witnessing what these traits look like exemplified by a gallery of characters ranging from near-idiotic to noble." Writing in *National Review*, Davenport noted further that the reader is "won over...to Cormac McCarthy's radically original way with tone and his sense of the aloneness of people in their individuality. At the heart of *Suttree* there is a strange sense of transformation and rebirth in which the protagonist wanders in a forest, sees visions, and emerges as a stranger to all that was before familiar. This is a scene no one else could have written."

Anatole Broyard wrote of the author in a *New York Times* review of *Suttree*: "His people are so vivid that they seem exotic, but this is just another way of saying that we tend to forget the range of human differences. Mr. McCarthy's hyperbole is not Southern rhetoric, but flesh and blood. Every tale is tall, if you look at it closely enough." In the *Washington Post*, Edward Rothstein added another dollop of praise: "It is a measure... of McCarthy's skills that the reader becomes engaged with those of [*Suttree's*] world, even intoxicated by the miasmatic language. For every image that is tiresomely weighty, there is one which illuminates dark crevices. For every horror, there is a sensitive observation. For every violent dislocation, there is a subtly touching dialogue or gesture." Nelson Algren compared *Suttree* with McCarthy's earlier work, noting in the *Chicago Tribune Books*: "There were no telephones, indoor plumbing, electricity, or TV in [his] previous novels...The language of his people was closer to the time of Shakespeare than to our own time. Here he has brought them all to town and into today—without losing the sense of old, old America. And without losing the freshness and the magic of the old wilderness. Although his new wilderness is an industrial wasteland, the magic remains."

In his next novel, 1985's *Blood Meridian; or, The Evening Redness in the West*, McCarthy leaves his home territory of Tennessee for the dusty plains of the Old West, a change possibly the result of the author's own relocation to El Paso, Texas, in 1974. *Blood Meridian* is by far McCarthy's bloodiest novel to date, detailing the adventures of a fourteen-year-old boy referred to only as "the kid" as he travels with a band of bounty hunters, paid by a Mexican governor to collect Indian scalps. The hunters, however, are not picky about their victims, leaving a long, bloody trail behind them as they go. "*Blood Meridian* comes at the reader like a slap in the face," wrote Caryn James in the *New York Times Book Review*. "While [it] is hard to get through, it is harder to ignore."

Though *Blood Meridian* is based loosely upon actual events of the 1840s and 1850s, it bears little resemblance to the historical westerns written by Louis L'Amour and others; instead, Woodward pointed out, it "has distinct echoes of *Moby Dick*, McCarthy's favorite book," for it concentrates on the barren, hellish landscape and near-surreal characters that make up the band of mercenaries. Most prominent among them is a huge, hairless man named Judge Holden. Though he is not the group's leader, "the Judge" commands the respect of the others as he pontificates by the fire each night. It is against the background of Judge Holden that the kid is placed, allowing the reader to evaluate for himself the morality of each character. "*Blood Meridian* stands the world of Louis L'Amour on its head (indeed, heaps hot coals upon it)," claimed *Los Angeles Times Book Review* contributor Tom Nolan, while Tom Pilkington, writing in the *World & I*, labeled it "perhaps the bloodiest book ever penned by an American author."

In defense of the meticulously detailed gore that pervades his novels, McCarthy told Woodward: "There's no such thing as life without bloodshed...I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first



Author: Cormac McCarthy (5)

ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous." Most importantly, though, the brutality depicted in McCarthy's writing has not reduced its power; rather, according to James, he "has asked us to witness evil not in order to understand it but to affirm its inexplicable reality; his elaborate language invents a world hinged between the real and surreal, jolting us out of complacency."

"By comparison with the sonority and carnage of *Blood Meridian*," wrote Woodward, "the world of *All the Pretty Horses* is less risky—repressed but sane." Winner of the National Book Award, *All the Pretty Horses* is the first installment in a three-book epic titled "*The Border Trilogy*." Set in 1949, it tells the story of John Grady Cole, a sixteen-year-old Texan who, along with his friend, Lacey Rawlins, sets off on horseback for Mexico. It becomes a coming-of-age tale, with Cole learning the skills of survival, facing adversity, and finding romance, all set against the backdrop of a land that has not lost the magic of the old West. "In the hands of some other writer," noted Bell, "this material might make for a combination of *Lonesome Dove* and *Huckleberry Finn*, but Mr. McCarthy's vision is deeper than Larry McMurtry's and, in its own way, darker than Mark Twain's." "What he has given us is a book of remarkable beauty and strength," wrote Tidmore, "the work of a master in perfect command of his medium."

While *All the Pretty Horses* is almost universally considered one of McCarthy's most accessible novels, it did not receive universally favorable reviews. This is due, in part, to the popularity of the novel, which opened it to criticism by reviewers previously unfamiliar with McCarthy's work. While Richard Eder of the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* admitted that "McCarthy's elevated prose does wonders for deserts, mountains, freezing winds, night landscapes and the tangibility of food, a bath and clean clothes," he warned that "loftiness gusts like a capsizing high wind, and the writing can choke on its own ornateness." Still, the strength of *All the Pretty Horses* seems to lie in the integrity of its central character, Cole, who was described by Bruce Allen in the *World & I* as "both a credible and admirable character; he is a perfect vehicle for the expression of the novel's themes." Watching Cole adhere to his values in the face of near-insurmountable adversity gives *All the Pretty Horses* "a sustained innocence and a lucidity new in McCarthy's work," according to Woodward. In addition to winning the National Book Award and garnering its author much greater critical attention, *All the Pretty Horses* also proved to be a tremendous commercial success.

The second installment in McCarthy's "*Border Trilogy*," 1994's *The Crossing* covers much of the same geographical and emotional terrain as *All the Pretty Horses*. *The Crossing* is divided into three sections. In the first, Billy Parham attempts to trap a wolf that has been killing cattle on his family's New Mexico ranch. After he successfully catches the animal, Billy decides to return it to its original territory in Mexico rather than kill it. Billy thus crosses the border with Mexico for the first time in the novel; unfortunately, the wolf is stolen for use in a dog-fighting arena, and Billy has to kill it to end its painful circumstance. After burying the wolf, Billy returns home to find that horse thieves have murdered his parents. The novel's second section finds Billy and his brother, Boyd, again crossing the border into Mexico in search of their parents' killers and their stolen horses. The brothers find and reclaim some of the horses, battle bandits, and have other picaresque adventures. At the close of the section, Boyd falls in love and returns home with a Mexican woman. In the third section, Billy decides after two years to journey back into Mexico to find Boyd. After hearing a song in which Boyd's death is described, Billy locates his brother's body and returns to New Mexico to bury it on his family's ranch.

As happened with *All the Pretty Horses*, critical reaction to *The Crossing* was starkly divided, with some reviewers terming the book an American masterpiece and others criticizing it as overwritten and pretentious. Writing in the *Chicago Tribune Books*, Bruce Allen dubbed it an "ambitious novel" that "offers a masterly display of tonal control and some of the most pitch-perfect rapturous prose being written these days." In particular, Allen praised the "dozens of breathtakingly imaginative descriptive passages" in the book. In contrast, *Los Angeles Times Book Review* contributor Richard Eder echoed his comments about *All the Pretty Horses*. Admitting that "McCarthy is a strong writer and he can be a magical one," Eder admitted: "There are splendid passages in



Author: Cormac McCarthy (6)

The Crossing." However, the critic also criticized the author's portrayal of Mexico and disapproved of his frequent use of untranslated passages in Spanish. "What is painfully weak," averred Eder, "is much of McCarthy's portrayal and use of Mexico; and it is a very serious weakness." Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* also disliked the novel, commenting that "the overall result is not a mythic, post-modernist masterpiece, but a hodge-podge of a book that is derivative, sentimental and pretentious all at once." At the other end of the critical divide, *New York Times Book Review* contributor Robert Hass declared *The Crossing* to be "a miracle in prose, an American original. It deserves to sit on the same shelf certainly with [Toni Morrison's] *Beloved* and [William Faulkner's] *As I Lay Dying*. " Commending the novel's "violent and stunningly beautiful, inconsolable landscapes," Hass called *The Crossing* "a masterwork."

The trilogy concluded with 1998's *Cities of the Plain*. The last installment in the series unites John Grady Cole, the protagonist of *All the Pretty Horses*, with *The Crossing's* Billy Parham. Set in New Mexico in the 1950s, the novel finds both men working as horse wranglers at the Cross Fours Ranch. Like the previous books in the trilogy, *Cities of the Plain* contains plenty of tight dialogue, cowboy philosophy, extreme violence, and carefully rendered descriptions of the Western landscape. As in *All the Pretty Horses*, the plot comes to focus on romance—in this case, Cole's doomed love for Magdalena, an epileptic Mexican prostitute whose affections are also coveted by her pimp, Eduardo. When Cole's attempt to purchase Magdalena from her boss fails, he plots instead to smuggle her across the Mexican border. After Eduardo learns of the planned escape, however, he arranges to have Magdalena kidnapped and killed. Despite Billy's efforts to keep Cole out of trouble, the younger man returns to the brothel, seeking retribution for Magdalena's death. He enters into a knife fight with Eduardo, a battle which results in the deaths of both men.

Critics responded to the concluding volume of the "*Border Trilogy*" with mixed reactions. The *Review of Contemporary Fiction's* Brian Evenson found that despite "some exceptional manipulations of prose," the novel "fails to measure up to either of the two previous volumes." Chilton Williamson, Jr. of *National Review* concurred that "*Cities of the Plain* in some ways makes a less than fitting conclusion to the trilogistic narrative"—although the critic noted that "over three volumes [McCarthy's] writing has lost none of its eloquence nor the description its particularist power." In his assessment of the narrative for *World Literature Today*, William Riggan unfavorably compared its "leisurely, measured, elegiac...and dull" pacing and tone with the "action-rich, dialogue-filled, character-driven Horses" and *The Crossing*. By contrast, *Time's* R. Z. Sheppard applauded McCarthy's efforts "to do for cowpunching what Melville did for whaling: describe in documentary detail how the job is done," and called the author "a virtuoso of the lyric description and the free-range sentence."

Despite the groundbreaking success of his "*Border Trilogy*," McCarthy remains elusive. He is, as Woodward wrote, "a radical conservative who still believes that the novel can, in his words, 'encompass all the various disciplines and interests of humanity.'" Summarizing his work, Cox stressed: "McCarthy is in no way a commercial writer. He is a novelist by profession, and he has not supplemented his income by turning his hand to more lucrative kinds of work such as Hollywood screenwriting...His most perceptive reviewers have consistently predicted more of the same solid work from McCarthy, and he has fulfilled these predictions. He deserves, now, serious attention from students of literature." Woodward concluded, simply, by declaring: "There isn't anyone remotely like him in contemporary American literature."

Further Readings:

Books:

Bell, Vereen, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, Louisiana State University Press (Baton Rouge, LA), 1988.
Contemporary Literary Criticism, Gale (Detroit, MI), Volume 4, 1975, Volume 57, 1990, Volume 59, 1990, Volume 101, 1997.

Dictionary of Literary Biography, Gale (Detroit, MI), Volume 6: *American Novelists since World War II, Second Series*, 1980, Volume 143: *American Novelists since World War II, Third Series*, 1994.



Author: Cormac McCarthy (7)

Hall, Wade H., and Rick Wallach, editors, *Sacred Violence: A Reader's Companion to Cormac McCarthy: Selected Essays from the First McCarthy Conference*, University of Texas at El Paso (El Paso, TX), 1995.

McCarthy, Cormac, *Suttree*, Random House (New York, NY), 1979.

Periodicals:

America, June 12, 1965, J. G. Murray, review of *The Orchard Keeper*.

Booklist, January 1, 1999, review of *Cities of the Plain*, p. 779.

Boston Globe, January 3, 1991; May 3, 1992; July 5, 1992; November 19, 1992.

Chicago Tribune, November 19, 1992; December 6, 1992.

Christian Science Monitor, June 11, 1992.

Commonweal, March 29, 1974; September 25, 1992; November 4, 1994, p. 11; December 2, 1994, p. 29.

English Journal, November, 1995, p. 99.

Esquire, March 27, 1979.

Los Angeles Times Book Review, June 9 1985; May 17, 1992; June 12, 1994, p. 3.

Nation, July 6, 1998, Dagoberto Glib, review of *Cities of the Plain*, p. 38.

National Review, March 16, 1979; March 8, 1985; October 12, 1998, Chilton Williamson, Jr., review of *Cities of the Plain*, p. 61.

New Republic, February 9, 1974; March 10, 1979; May 6, 1985; July 11, 1994, p. 38.

New Statesman, May 2, 1980.

New Statesman & Society, August 19, 1994, p. 38.

Newsweek, January 7, 1974; May 18, 1992; June 13, 1994, p. 54.

New York, May 18, 1992; June 13, 1994, p. 70.

New Yorker, August 26, 1974; August 10, 1992; June 27, 1994, p. 180.

New York Times, January 20, 1979; May 27, 1992; November 19, 1992; June 21, 1994, p. C21.

New York Times Book Review, September 29, 1968; January 13, 1974; February 18, 1979; September 23, 1984; April 28, 1985; December 21, 1986; May 17, 1992; May 31, 1992; August 30, 1992; June 12, 1994, p. 1.

New York Times Magazine, April 19, 1992.

Review of Contemporary Fiction, fall, 1998, Brian Evenson, review of *Cities of the Plain*, p. 250.

Saturday Review, June 12, 1965.

Sewanee Review, October, 1985.

Southern Review, autumn, 1992.

Spectator, May 24, 1980, Frank Rudman, review of *Suttree*.

Texas Monthly, July, 1998, Michael Hall, "Desperately Seeking Cormac," pp. 76-79.

Time, September 17, 1968; January 4, 1993; June 6, 1994, p. 62; May 18, 1998, R. Z. Sheppard, "Thar She Moos," p. 95.

Times Literary Supplement, May 2, 1980; April 21, 1989.

Tribune Books (Chicago, IL), January 28, 1979; May 10, 1992; June 26, 1994, p. 5.

Village Voice, July 15, 1986; May 19, 1992.

Virginia Quarterly Review, autumn, 1986; autumn, 1992.

Washington Post, November 2, 1990; November 19, 1992.

Washington Post Book World, January 13, 1974; March 19, 1979; May 3, 1992; June 28, 1992; June 5, 1994, p. 1.

World & I, September, 1992; October, 1998, Edwin T. Arnold, review of *Cities of the Plain*, p. 258.

World Literature Today, winter, 2000, William Riggan, review of *Cities of the Plain*, p. 173.

Source:† Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2007.



Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *The Road*

Reviews:

Booklist review August 2006

Starred Review A man and a boy, father and son, "each the other's world entire," walk a road in "the ashes of the late world." In this stunning departure from his previous work, McCarthy (*No Country for Old Men*, 2005) envisions a postapocalyptic scenario. Cities have been destroyed, plants and animals have died, and few humans survive. The sun is hidden by ash, and it is winter. With every scrap of food looted, many of the living have turned to cannibalism. The man and the boy plod toward the sea. The man remembers the world before; as his memories die, so, too, does that world. The boy was born after everything changed. The man, dying, has a fierce paternal love and will to survive—yet he saves his last two bullets for himself and his son. Although the holocaust is never explained, this is the kind of grim warning that leads to nightmares. Its spare, precise language is rich with other explorations, too: hope in the face of hopelessness, the ephemeral nature of our existence, the vanishing worlds we all carry within us. McCarthy evokes Beckett, using repetition and negation to crushing effect, showing us by their absence the things we will miss. Hypnotic and haunting, relentlessly dark, this is a novel to read in late-night solitude. Though the focus never leaves the two travelers, they carry our humanity, and we can't help but feel the world hangs in the balance of their hopeless quest. A masterpiece. ((Reviewed August 2006)) Copyright 2006 *Booklist Reviews*.

Library Journal review September 2006

Winner of the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, McCarthy (*All the Pretty Horses*) here offers a prescient account of a man and his son trying to survive in a devastated country where food is scarce and everyone has become a scavenger. The term survival of the fittest rings true here very few people remain, and friends are extinct. Essentially, this is a story about nature vs. nurture, commitment and promises, and though there aren't many characters, there is abundant life in the prose. We are reminded how McCarthy has mastered the world outside of our domestic and social circles, with each description reading as if he had pulled a scene from the landscape and pasted it in the book. He uses metaphors the way some writers use punctuation, sprinkling them about with an artist's eye, showing us that literature from the heart still exists. Recommended for all libraries.

BookPage review October 2006

Cormac McCarthy's bleak vision of the end times

It's the ultimate pairing: Cormac McCarthy plus the apocalypse. As an author who has delivered some of the darkest moments in modern fiction via books like *Blood Meridian* and *Child of God*, McCarthy seems uniquely suited to an exploration of what the world might be like at its end. With *The Road*, he has developed this nightmarish scenario into an affecting and compassionate novel, as an unnamed father and son wander without hope through a blasted, barren landscape.

The exact nature of the catastrophe that has reduced the world to a wasteland is never precisely specified, but there are hints that the event was nuclear-related. In an eerie flashback, the father recalls "a long shear of light, and then a series of low concussions...a dull rose glow in the windowglass." The results—charred corpses in melted cars, a constant rain of ash, the wiping-out of all wildlife—are there for father and son to witness as they make their way on the road of the book's title, pushing a shopping cart filled with their few possessions. To stay in one place is to invite attack from other survivors, who have formed primitive communes and engage in cannibalism, and so the pair are, for all intents and purposes, doomed to eternal travel.



Reading Group Guide (2)

Spotlight on: *The Road*

Reviews: (continued)

But as father and son pick through the remnants of civilization in search of edible food and serviceable clothing, encounters with other people are inevitable, and when the boy shows concern for his fellow survivors, his father—unsympathetic and protective—forbids him to make contact. These moments of opposition between boy and man, despite the book's tense, menacing atmosphere, come across as classic instances of father-son sparring. The earth may be in an arrested state, but the pair's relationship continues to evolve, its course progressing naturally. McCarthy's depiction of their bond is remarkably delicate and sympathetic.

The fact that their fate could be our own adds a layer of dark fascination to the novel, a perverse allure. Indeed, a speculative account of this kind is bound to arouse a sort of obscene curiosity in its audience, and to that end, reading *The Road* is a bit like observing the aftermath of a car accident—you want to look away, you should look away, but you can't.

Coming from McCarthy, *The Road* feels inevitable. It's an absolute expression of his rather nihilistic worldview, the farthest possible extension of his aesthetic. Last year's *No Country for Old Men* introduced a more accessible style from the author, and with *The Road*, the trend continues. The novel doesn't strive for epic status, nor is it weighted with the broad metaphors and sweeping rhetorical passages that characterize McCarthy's previous work. The writing in *The Road* is his most direct to date, the prose less elliptical and easier to process than ever before. Yet, there's no mistaking where you are when you read *The Road*: in McCarthy country—terrible, beautiful, and like no other place in contemporary literature.

Kirkus review July 2006

Even within the author's extraordinary body of work, this stands as a radical achievement, a novel that demands to be read and reread. McCarthy (*No Country for Old Men*, 2005, etc.) pushes his thematic obsessions to their extremes in a parable that reads like *Night of the Living Dead* as rewritten by Samuel Beckett. Where much of McCarthy's fiction has been set in the recent past of the South and West, here he conjures a nightmare of an indeterminate future. A great fire has left the country covered in layers of ash and littered with incinerated corpses. Foraging through the wasteland are a father and son, neither named (though the son calls the father "Papa"). The father dimly remembers the world as it was and occasionally dreams of it. The son was born on the cusp of whatever has happened—apocalypse? holocaust?—and has never known anything else. His mother committed suicide rather than face the unspeakable horror. As they scavenge for survival, they consider themselves the "good guys," carriers of the fire, while most of the few remaining survivors are "bad guys," cannibals who eat babies. In order to live, they must keep moving amid this shadowy landscape, in which ashes have all but obliterated the sun. In their encounters along their pilgrimage to the coast, where things might not be better but where they can go no further, the boy emerges as the novel's moral conscience. The relationship between father and son has a sweetness that represents all that's good in a universe where conventional notions of good and evil have been extinguished. Amid the bleakness of survival-through which those who wish they'd never been born struggle to persevere—there are glimmers of comedy in an encounter with an old man who plays the philosophical role of the Shakespearean fool. Though the sentences of McCarthy's recent work are shorter and simpler than they once were, his prose combines the cadence of prophecy with the indelible images of poetry. A novel of horrific beauty, where death is the only truth. Copyright *Kirkus* 2006



Reading Group Guide (3)

Spotlight on:
The Road

Reviews: (continued)

Publishers Weekly review July 2006

Violence, in McCarthy's postapocalyptic tour de force, has been visited worldwide in the form of a "long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" that leaves cities and forests burned, birds and fish dead and the earth shrouded in gray clouds of ash. In this landscape, an unnamed man and his young son journey down a road to get to the sea. (The man's wife, who gave birth to the boy after calamity struck, has killed herself.) They carry blankets and scavenged food in a shopping cart, and the man is armed with a revolver loaded with his last two bullets. Beyond the ever-present possibility of starvation lies the threat of roving bands of cannibalistic thugs. The man assures the boy that the two of them are "good guys," but from the way his father treats other stray survivors the boy sees that his father has turned into an amoral survivalist, tenuously attached to the morality of the past by his fierce love for his son. McCarthy establishes himself here as the closest thing in American literature to an Old Testament prophet, trolling the blackest registers of human emotion to create a haunting and grim novel about civilization's slow death after the power goes out. 250,000 announced first printing; BOMC main selection. (Oct.)



Reading Group Guide from Random House

Spotlight on: *The Road*

Discussion Questions:

The introduction, discussion questions, suggestions for further reading, and author biography that follow are designed to stimulate your group's discussion of *The Road*, the tender, harrowing new novel of unfailing hope amid epic devastation by acclaimed writer Cormac McCarthy.

"His tale of survival and the miracle of goodness only adds to McCarthy's stature as a living master. It's gripping, frightening and, ultimately, beautiful. It might very well be the best book of the year, period."—*San Francisco Chronicle*

About The Book:

Set in the smoking ashes of a postapocalyptic America, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* tells the story of a man and his son's journey toward the sea and an uncertain salvation. The world they pass through is a ghastly vision of scorched countryside and blasted cities "held by cores of blackened looters who tunneled among the ruins and crawled from the rubble white of tooth and eye carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell" [p. 181]. It is a starved world, all plant and animal life dead or dying, some of the few human survivors even eating each other alive.

The father and son move through the ruins searching for food and shelter, trying to keep safe from murderous, roving bands. They have only a pistol to defend themselves, the clothes they are wearing, a cart of scavenged food—and each other.

Awesome in the totality of its vision, *The Road* is an unflinching meditation on the worst and the best that we are capable of: ultimate destructiveness, desperate tenacity, and the tenderness that keeps two people alive in the face of total devastation.

Reader's Guide

1. Cormac McCarthy has an unmistakable prose style. What do you see as the most distinctive features of that style? How is the writing in *The Road* in some ways more like poetry than narrative prose?
2. Why do you think McCarthy has chosen not to give his characters names? How do the generic labels of "the man" and "the boy" affect the way in which readers relate to them?
3. How is McCarthy able to make the postapocalyptic world of *The Road* seem so real and utterly terrifying? Which descriptive passages are especially vivid and visceral in their depiction of this blasted landscape? What do you find to be the most horrifying features of this world and the survivors who inhabit it?
4. McCarthy doesn't make explicit what kind of catastrophe has ruined the earth and destroyed human civilization, but what might be suggested by the many descriptions of a scorched landscape covered in ash? What is implied by the father's statement that "On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world" [p. 32]?
5. As the father is dying, he tells his son he must go on in order to "carry the fire." When the boy asks if the fire is real, the father says, "It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it" [p. 279]. What is this fire? Why is it so crucial that they not let it die?



Reading Group Guide (4)

Spotlight on: *The Road*

6. McCarthy envisions a postapocalyptic world in which “murder was everywhere upon the land” and the earth would soon be “largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes” [p. 181]. How difficult or easy is it to imagine McCarthy’s nightmare vision actually happening? Do you think people would likely behave as they do in the novel, under the same circumstances? Does it now seem that human civilization is headed toward such an end?
7. The man and the boy think of themselves as the “good guys.” In what ways are they like and unlike the “bad guys” they encounter? What do you think McCarthy is suggesting in the scenes in which the boy begs his father to be merciful to the strangers they encounter on the road? How is the boy able to retain his compassion—to be, as one reviewer put it, “compassion incarnate”?
8. The sardonic blind man named Ely who the man and boy encounter on the road tells the father that “There is no God and we are his prophets” [p. 170]. What does he mean by this? Why does the father say about his son, later in the same conversation, “What if I said that he’s a god?” [p. 172] Are we meant to see the son as a savior?
9. *The Road* takes the form of a classic journey story, a form that dates back to Homer’s *Odyssey*. To what destination are the man and the boy journeying? In what sense are they “pilgrims”? What, if any, is the symbolic significance of their journey?
10. McCarthy’s work often dramatizes the opposition between good and evil, with evil sometimes emerging triumphant. What does *The Road* ultimately suggest about good and evil? Which force seems to have greater power in the novel?
11. What makes the relationship between the boy and his father so powerful and poignant? What do they feel for each other? How do they maintain their affection for and faith in each other in such brutal conditions?
12. Why do you think McCarthy ends the novel with the image of trout in mountain streams before the end of the world: “In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery” [p. 287]. What is surprising about this ending? Does it provide closure, or does it prompt a rethinking of all that has come before? What does it suggest about what lies ahead?

Suggested Reading:

Horseclans, Robert Adams
The Handmaid’s Tale and *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood
The Postman, David Brin
The Penultimate Truth, Philip K. Dick
As I Lay Dying, William Faulkner
Ape and Essence, Aldous Huxley
The Children of Men, P.D. James
Children of the Dust, Louise Laurence

About the Author

Cormac McCarthy was born in Rhode Island. He attended the University of Tennessee in the early 1950s, and joined the U.S. Air Force, serving four years, two of them stationed in Alaska. McCarthy then returned to the university, where he published in the student literary magazine and won the Ingram-Merrill Award for creative



Reading Group Guide (5)

Spotlight on: *The Road*

writing in 1959 and 1960. McCarthy next went to Chicago, where he worked as an auto mechanic while writing his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*.

The Orchard Keeper was published by Random House in 1965; McCarthy's editor there was Albert Erskine, William Faulkner's long-time editor. Before publication, McCarthy received a traveling fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, which he used to travel to Ireland. In 1966 he also received the Rockefeller Foundation Grant, with which he continued to tour Europe, settling on the island of Ibiza. Here, McCarthy completed revisions of his next novel, *Outer Dark*.

In 1967, McCarthy returned to the United States, moving to Tennessee. *Outer Dark* was published by Random House in 1968, and McCarthy received the Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Writing in 1969. His next novel, *Child of God*, was published in 1973. From 1974 to 1975, McCarthy worked on the screenplay for a PBS film called *The Gardener's Son*, which premiered in 1977. A revised version of the screenplay was later published by Ecco Press.

In the late 1970s, McCarthy moved to Texas, and in 1979 published his fourth novel, *Suttree*, a book that had occupied his writing life on and off for twenty years. He received a MacArthur Fellowship in 1981, and published his fifth novel, *Blood Meridian*, in 1985.

After the retirement of Albert Erskine, McCarthy moved from Random House to Alfred A. Knopf. *All the Pretty Horses*, the first volume of *The Border Trilogy*, was published by Knopf in 1992. It won both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award and was later turned into a feature film. *The Stonemason*, a play that McCarthy had written in the mid-1970s and subsequently revised, was published by Ecco Press in 1994. Soon thereafter, Knopf released the second volume of "*The Border Trilogy*," *The Crossing*; the third volume, *Cities of the Plain*, was published in 1998.

McCarthy's next novel, *No Country for Old Men* was published in 2005. This was followed in 2006 by a novel in dramatic form, *The Sunset Limited*, originally performed by Steppenwolf Theatre Company of Chicago and published in paperback by Vintage Books. McCarthy's most recent novel, *The Road*, was also published by Knopf in 2006.